

Hindrances and Assistances (2 of 5) Aversion or Averting

January 31, 2023

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

hostility, ill will, challenges, avert

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We are continuing today with strategies for dealing with challenges. We have healthy and unhealthy strategies. All too often, unhealthy strategies, which may represent our best efforts to cope with great difficulty, sometimes make the situation worse. We spiral out or become caught up in our reactivity to the challenge. Sometimes the reactivity or the “caught up-ness” or what gets triggered in us can be so strong that it’s overwhelming and challenging. So it’s helpful to develop a habit of looking at how we are in challenges. We can ask: “What’s my strategy here? What am I trying to do? How am I reacting or responding to this challenge that I have?”

Many times the five hindrances are unhealthy strategies. While trying our best to cope with a challenge, we are often choosing a strategy that seems beneficial but actually is not. This is particularly true with the second of the hindrances, which is often translated into English as “aversion.” And so, in Buddhist English, we have to understand that when the word “aversion” is used, it doesn’t mean simply the state of averting ourselves from something. It’s also the state of having a certain kind of hostility or ill will towards something. Sometimes the instinct to fight and attack the challenge can seem very productive, important, appropriate, or justified in the moment. Maybe it even accomplishes what we want, but it does so at a tremendous cost.

The example that I’ve used often (I apologize for repeating myself) is my son when he was young. There were times when my “no” to him was in what I called my “strong voice.” I’m afraid that I was pretty angry by the time I used it. But I felt that his behavior had to stop, so I used a strong voice and then he would stop. The times I said no to him were appropriate – it was helpful for him to hear that. And he would be happy afterward. He knew the limits of what he could do. He understood the world a bit better.

When I used a strong voice, I would accomplish what I wanted to do: “Oh, that worked; that was good.” But then sometime later, I heard him using the same voice with his younger brother. I thought: “Oh my! What have I done here? What kind of conditioning is that? What example have I given of what’s appropriate for how to be with people?”

The long-term consequence of the strong voice (the strong no) – aversion, which sometimes accomplishes what we want in the moment – is not so healthy. It creates unhealthy relationships, perhaps. It is an attempt to take care of ourselves at times, but sometimes aversion or “no” doesn’t really take care of ourselves. What it is taking care of is our desires, our conceit, and we don’t want that threatened in any way. We want to be able to do as we please.

There’s a whole world of strategy that comes into play with the second hindrance of aversion. And we have to understand that this is a strategy. We’re trying to accomplish something in the world through it. So then the question is: Is there a more healthy way of accomplishing some of those same things?

The healthy side of aversion is averting. There is healthy, appropriate turning away from things, stepping away from things. “I’m not going to say that.” “I’m not going to go into that.” “I’m not going to participate in this.” It isn’t done with hostility or anger. It isn’t shutting down. Rather, it’s acknowledging: “This is not working. And until somehow this can work better, I’m going to step back. I’m going to turn away.”

There are all kinds of healthy turning away that we can do in our lives and as a strategy. There is turning away so we can recover, turning away so we can settle ourselves. There is turning away so we can understand how we’ve been impacted, and then later, we might be able to come back and have a conversation or deal with some issue if it’s appropriate.

Rather than rushing headlong in to take care of a problem that doesn't have to be taken care of in the moment, maybe we can wait a few minutes to catch our breath and get a clear sense of what's happening. Then we can find other strategies besides hostility, besides blaming someone.

Sometimes hostility is directed at oneself. That is just as important as hostility directed at another person. There might be guilt, shame: "Here, I did it, I made a big mistake." Again, this kind of aversion, hostility, or criticism of ourselves is also a strategy that is trying to make things better, but it doesn't.

Is there another way? Is there a way of recognizing: "Wow, that didn't work. Maybe I did say something I shouldn't have said. I'm going to turn away from that. I'm not going to do that again. But, I'm not going to attack myself. I'm not going to live under the weight of guilt or shame. I'm going to do something better. I'm going to say no to it. And in the future, I'm going to dedicate myself to doing better. I'm going to find a better way."

In Buddhism, we learn from the past just enough to be inspired and even be encouraged that there is a better way. "I'm going to find it, I'm going to do that. I'm going to say no to unhealthy behavior and try to find healthy ways of doing that."

Definitely, there are times when we want to learn to avert, when we want to say no. There's a way of saying no to someone that is not attacking them or exactly saying, "You're wrong, that can't be done." But rather, we can say: "No, I can't participate in that. No, this doesn't work for me."

You might say: "No, I think if that's the way this conversation is going, I need to step away for a little bit. I need to regroup because this kind of conversation is causing me to not come from my best place or to be clear. I feel my anger coming up now, and I don't want hostility to be there with my anger. Can we take a break? I'd like to go around the block and chill." When you come back, you can still be very definitive and say: "No, this doesn't work. This is not right for me. Can we find a different way?"

So we can be definitive and clear, but we don't come from a place of hostility. The strategy is: how can we find a way to be connected? How can we find a way to cooperate in this endeavor? How can we find a way in which we take care of ourselves and stand up for ourselves, but there is no hostility, no one is attacked?

I've seen sometimes in Buddhism, where we have this strong value of not acting with aversion, not having aversion, that people misunderstand it. They think they're never allowed to say no or to turn away or step away from something because "Oh, that's aversion." That's not true.

So there's the strategy of averting. This strategy can go in a direction that contains hostility, ill will. In the other direction, it contains wisdom, non-ill will, and non-hostility. It is a nonhostile way of saying no. And it's possible to have that be very definitive.

Being definitive and establishing clear limits of what you're going to participate in, or what you're going to do, can be done with love and kindness. It might not be reciprocated because people might misunderstand it. On the one hand, that is their problem, and they will have to come to terms with it psychologically for themselves. But many people are not going to do that. So then you have to decide if you are going to speak more about the impact of their actions. Or maybe you see more clearly what they're capable of and what their tendencies are. Perhaps it gives you more information about how much you should step away. You see: "This doesn't work at all. Now that I understand this person is kind of stuck, I don't think we can find a way here."

One of the most important things I would like to suggest is that when you're challenged, take a little time to consider what are you trying to do in relation to the challenge. What are you trying to accomplish? Is the way you're trying to do that – does it work? Is it healthy? I say that because many times, people in challenging situations are operating from their gut reactions – sometimes making quick decisions or not thinking things out.

A Dharma life is one in which we don't act impulsively. Sometimes we might act spontaneously, but we never act impulsively, where we are acting from our reactivity. We take time to ask: "What am I trying to do here? What am I trying to accomplish? And is the way that I'm doing it for the welfare and well-being of everyone concerned?"

I think that is the real key to a Dharma process. How can we find a way that's the best for everyone involved in the conflict, even for people who are causing so much trouble? This does not mean we have to put up with it or that we can't avert and step away or be clear. Rather, it is the notion of what's best for all of us – not me versus you. You don't have to say that you're doing that, but it leads to long-term well-being. Hostility only leads to very

short-term well-being at the best. So ask: "What am I trying to do and is the way I'm doing it really healthy for myself, others, and this world?"

Thank you, and we'll continue going through these strategies for challenges tomorrow.